

C H A P T E R

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Assessing payment adequacy and updating payments in fee-for-service Medicare

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Chapter summary

As required by law, the Commission makes payment update recommendations annually for providers paid under fee-for-service (FFS) Medicare. An update is the amount (usually expressed as a percentage change) by which the base payment for all providers in a payment system is changed relative to the prior year. To determine an update, we first assess the adequacy of Medicare payments for providers in the current year (2014) by considering beneficiaries' access to care, the quality of care, providers' access to capital, and Medicare payments and providers' costs. Next, we assess how those providers' costs are likely to change in the year the update will take effect (the policy year—2015). As part of the process, we examine payment adequacy for the “efficient” provider to the extent possible. Finally, we make a judgment on what, if any, update is needed. (The Commission also assesses Medicare payment systems for Part C and Part D, but because they are not FFS payment systems, they are not part of the discussion in this chapter.)

This year, we consider recommendations in 10 FFS sectors: hospital inpatient and outpatient, physician and other health professional, ambulatory surgical center, outpatient dialysis facility, skilled nursing facility, home health care agency, inpatient rehabilitation facility, long-term care hospital, and hospice services. Each year, the Commission looks at all available indicators of payment adequacy and reevaluates any prior year assumptions using the most

In this chapter

- Are Medicare payments adequate in 2014?
- What cost changes are expected in 2015?
- How should Medicare payments change in 2015?
- Payment adequacy in context

recent data available to make sure its recommendations accurately reflect current conditions. We may also consider changes that redistribute payments within a payment system to correct any biases that may result in inequity among providers, make patients with certain conditions financially undesirable, or make particular procedures unusually profitable. Finally, we also make recommendations to improve program integrity.

These update recommendations, if enacted, could significantly change the revenues providers receive from Medicare. Rates set to cover the costs of relatively efficient providers not only help create fiscal pressure on all providers to control their costs but also help create pressure for broader reforms to address what has traditionally been the fundamental problem of FFS payment systems—that providers are paid more when they deliver more services regardless of the quality or value of those additional services. Broader reforms such as bundled payments and accountable care organizations are meant to stimulate delivery system reform toward more integrated and value-oriented health care systems.

The Commission also examines payment rates for services that can be provided in multiple settings. Medicare often pays different amounts for similar services across settings. Basing the payment rate on the rate in the most efficient setting would save money for Medicare, reduce cost sharing for beneficiaries, and reduce the incentive to provide services in the higher paid setting. However, putting the principle of paying the same rate for the same service across settings into practice can be complex because it requires that the definition of the services and the characteristics of the beneficiaries across settings be sufficiently similar. In March 2012, we recommended equalizing rates for evaluation and management office visits provided in hospital outpatient departments and physicians' offices (Medicare Payment Advisory Commission 2012). In this report, we extend that recommendation to additional services provided in those two settings and recommend consistent payment between acute care hospitals and long-term care hospitals for certain classes of patients (see Chapter 3). The Commission will continue to analyze opportunities for applying this principle to other services and settings, such as those that provide post-acute care. ■

Background

The goal of Medicare payment policy should be to obtain good value for the program's expenditures, which means maintaining beneficiaries' access to high-quality services while encouraging efficient use of resources. Anything less does not serve the interests of the taxpayers and beneficiaries who finance Medicare through their taxes and premiums. Steps toward this goal involve:

- setting the base payment rate (i.e., the payment for services of average complexity) at the right level;
- developing payment adjustments that accurately reflect market, service, and patient cost differences beyond providers' control;
- adjusting payments for quality; and
- considering the need for annual payment updates and other policy changes.

To help determine the appropriate base payment rate for a given payment system in 2015, we first consider whether payments are adequate for relatively efficient providers in 2014. To inform the Commission's judgment, we examine data on beneficiaries' access to care, the quality of care, providers' access to capital, and Medicare payments and providers' costs for 2014. We then consider how providers' costs will change in 2015. Taking these factors into account, we then determine how Medicare payments for the sector in aggregate should change in 2015.

Within a given level of funding, we may also consider changes in payment policy to improve payment accuracy. Those changes are intended to improve equity among providers or access to care for beneficiaries and may also affect the distribution of payments among providers in a sector. For example, we have recommended removing biases in the skilled nursing facility (SNF) prospective payment system (PPS) that make it more financially desirable to treat patients who need only therapy than medically complex patients.

We also make recommendations to improve program integrity when needed. In some cases, our data analysis reveals problematic variation across geographic regions or providers in service utilization. For example, in reaction to patterns of unusually long stays in a subset of hospices, we recommended medical review focused on hospices that have many long-stay patients.

We compare our recommendations for updates and other policy changes for 2015 with the base payment rates specified in Medicare law to understand the implications for beneficiaries, providers, and the Medicare program. As has been the Commission's policy in the past, we consider our recommendations each year in light of the most current data and, in general, recommend updates for a single year.

Are Medicare payments adequate in 2014?

The first part of the Commission's approach to developing payment updates is to assess the adequacy of current Medicare payments. For each sector, we make a judgment by examining information on:

- beneficiaries' access to care
- the quality of care
- providers' access to capital
- Medicare payments and providers' costs for 2014

Some measures focus on beneficiaries (e.g., access to care) and some focus on providers (e.g., the relationship between payments and costs). The direct relevance, availability, and quality of each type of information vary among sectors, and no single measure provides all the information needed for the Commission to judge payment adequacy. Ultimately, the Commission makes its recommendations considering all of these factors.

Beneficiaries' access to care

Access to care is an important indicator of the willingness of providers to serve Medicare beneficiaries and the adequacy of Medicare payments. For example, poor access could indicate that Medicare payments are too low. However, factors unrelated to Medicare's payment policies may also affect access to care. These factors include coverage policy, beneficiaries' preferences, local market conditions, and supplemental insurance.

The measures we use to assess beneficiaries' access to care depend on the availability and relevance of information in each sector. We use results from several surveys to assess physicians' and other health professionals' willingness to serve beneficiaries and beneficiaries' opinions about their access to physician and other health professional services.

For home health services, we examine data on whether communities are served by providers.

Access: Capacity and supply of providers

Rapid growth in the capacity of providers to furnish care may increase beneficiaries' access and indicate that payments are more than adequate to cover their costs. Changes in technology and practice patterns may also affect providers' capacity. For example, less-invasive procedures could be performed in outpatient settings and lower priced equipment could be more easily purchased by providers, increasing the capacity to provide certain services.

Substantial increases in the number of providers may suggest that payments are more than adequate and could raise concerns about the value of the services being furnished. For instance, rapid growth in the number of home health agencies suggests that Medicare's payment rates may be more than adequate (confirmed by our analysis of Medicare margins for this sector) and, because the growth has been accompanied by increased cases of fraud, raises concerns about whether current program safeguards are adequate. If Medicare is not the dominant payer for a given provider type, changes in the number of providers may be influenced more by other payers and their demand for services and thus may be difficult to relate to Medicare payments. When facilities close, we try to distinguish between closures that have serious implications for access to care in a community and those that may have resulted from excess capacity.

Access: Volume of services

The volume of services can be an indirect indicator of beneficiary access to services. An increase in volume shows that beneficiaries are receiving more services and suggests sufficient access—although it does not necessarily demonstrate that the services are appropriate. Volume is also an indicator of payment adequacy; an increase in volume beyond that expected for an increase in the number of beneficiaries could suggest that Medicare's payment rates are too high. Very rapid increases in the volume of a service might even raise questions about program integrity or whether the definition of the corresponding benefit is too vague. Reductions in the volume of services can sometimes be a signal that revenues are inadequate for providers to continue operating or to provide the same level of service. Finally, rapid changes in volume between sectors whose services can be substituted for one another may suggest distortions

in payment and raise questions about provider equity. For example, payment rates for evaluation and management (E&M) office visits are much higher in hospital outpatient departments (HOPD) than in physicians' offices, and HOPDs have recently increased their volume of those services, while physicians' offices have seen a decrease.

However, changes in the volume of services are often difficult to interpret because increases and decreases could be explained by other factors such as population changes, changes in disease prevalence among beneficiaries, technology, practice patterns, deliberate policy interventions, and beneficiaries' preferences. For example, the number of Medicare beneficiaries in the traditional fee-for-service (FFS) program decreased in recent years as more beneficiaries chose plans in the Medicare Advantage program; therefore, we look at the volume of services per FFS beneficiary as well as the total volume of services. Explicit decisions about service coverage can also influence volume. For example, in 2004, CMS began enforcing compliance with a rule mandating that a certain percentage of patients in each inpatient rehabilitation facility (IRF) have 1 of 13 qualifying conditions. As a result, the volume of IRF patients decreased markedly.

Changes in the volume of physician services must be interpreted particularly cautiously. Evidence suggests that for discretionary services, volume may go up when payment rates go down—the so-called volume offset. For other services, such as those requiring significant investment in equipment, volume may eventually shrink. Whether a volume offset phenomenon exists in other sectors depends on how discretionary the services are and on the ability of providers to influence beneficiaries' demand for them.

Quality of care

The relationship between the quality of care and the adequacy of Medicare payment is not direct. Simply increasing payments through an update for all providers in a sector, regardless of their individual quality, is unlikely to solve quality problems because, historically, Medicare payment systems have created little or no incentive for providers to spend additional resources on improving quality. Medicare's payment systems are not generally based on quality; payment is usually the same regardless of the quality of care. For many years, the Commission has recommended creating incentives in Medicare FFS payment systems to reward better quality, and the Medicare program has recently begun to carry out

quality-based payment policies in a number of sectors. The Commission continues to look for ways to further improve quality-based payment policies, including delivery system reform that rewards care coordination and makes possible more comprehensive measures of population health.

Providers' access to capital

Providers must have access to capital to maintain and modernize their facilities and to improve their capability to deliver patient care. Widespread inability to access capital throughout a sector may in part reflect the adequacy of Medicare payments (or, possibly, even the expectation of changes in the adequacy of Medicare payments). Some sectors, such as hospitals, require large capital investments, and access to capital can be a useful indicator. Other sectors, such as home health care, do not need large capital investments, so access to capital is a more limited indicator. In some cases, a broader measure such as employment may be a useful indicator of financial health within a sector. Similarly, in sectors where providers derive most of their payments from other payers (such as ambulatory surgical centers) or other lines of business, or when conditions in the credit markets are extreme, access to capital may be a limited indicator of the adequacy of Medicare payments.

Medicare payments and providers' costs for 2014

For most payment sectors, we estimate Medicare payments and providers' costs for 2014 to inform our update recommendations for 2015. To maintain Medicare beneficiaries' access to high-quality care while creating financial pressure on providers to make better use of taxpayers' and beneficiaries' resources, we investigate whether payments are adequate to cover the costs of relatively efficient providers, where available data permit such providers to be defined.

Relatively efficient providers use fewer inputs to produce quality outputs. Efficiency could be increased by using the same inputs to produce a higher quality output or by using fewer inputs to produce the same quality output. We are exploring ways to define relatively efficient providers. For example, we continue to examine the financial performance of hospitals with consistently low risk-adjusted costs per discharge, mortality, and readmissions (Medicare Payment Advisory Commission 2013, Medicare Payment Advisory Commission 2012, Medicare Payment Advisory Commission 2011, Medicare Payment Advisory Commission 2010). We also continue to analyze

relatively efficient providers in the SNF sector. We have found that some SNFs have considerably lower costs than others and substantially better quality (Medicare Payment Advisory Commission 2011). We identified relatively efficient home health agencies (HHAs) last year (Medicare Payment Advisory Commission 2013). We plan to extend our efficient-provider analysis to other sectors as data and resources permit.

For providers that submit cost reports to CMS—acute care hospitals, SNFs, HHAs, outpatient dialysis facilities, IRFs, long-term care hospitals, and hospices—we estimate total Medicare-allowable costs and assess the relationship between Medicare's payments and those costs. We typically express the relationship between payments and costs as a payment margin, which is calculated as aggregate Medicare payments for a sector, less costs, divided by payments. By this measure, if costs increase faster than payments, margins will decrease.

In general, to estimate payments, we first apply the annual payment updates specified in law for 2013 and 2014 to our base data (2012 for most sectors). We then model the effects of other policy changes that will affect the level of payments in 2014. To estimate 2014 costs, we consider the rate of input price inflation or historical cost growth and, as appropriate, we adjust for changes in the product (such as fewer visits per episode of home health care) and trends in key indicators (such as historic cost growth and the distribution of cost growth among providers).

Using margins

In most cases, we assess Medicare margins for the services furnished in a single sector and covered by a specific payment system (e.g., SNF or home health services). However, in the case of hospitals, which often provide services that are paid for by multiple Medicare payment systems, our measures of payments and costs for an individual sector could become distorted because of the allocation of overhead costs or the presence of complementary services. For example, having a hospital-based SNF or IRF may allow a hospital to achieve shorter lengths of stay in its acute care units, thereby decreasing costs and increasing inpatient margins. For hospitals, we assess the adequacy of payments for the whole range of Medicare services they furnish—inpatient and outpatient (which together account for more than 90 percent of Medicare payments to hospitals), SNF, home health, psychiatric, and rehabilitation services—and compute an overall Medicare hospital margin encompassing costs

and payments for all the sectors. The hospital update recommendation in Chapter 3 applies to hospital inpatient and outpatient payments; the updates for other distinct units of the hospital, such as SNFs, are covered in separate chapters.

Total margins, which include payments from all payers as well as revenue from nonpatient sources, do not play a direct role in the Commission's update deliberations. The adequacy of Medicare payments is assessed relative to the costs of treating Medicare beneficiaries, and the Commission's recommendations address a sector's Medicare payments, not total payments. We calculate a sector's Medicare margin to determine whether total Medicare payments cover average providers' costs for treating Medicare patients and to inform our judgment about payment adequacy. Margins will always be distributed around the average, and aggregate payment adequacy does not mean that every provider has a positive margin. To assess whether changes are needed in the distribution of payments, we calculate Medicare margins for certain subgroups of providers with unique roles in the health care system. For example, because location and teaching status enter into the payment formula, we calculate Medicare margins based on where hospitals are located (in urban or rural areas) and their teaching status (major teaching, other teaching, or nonteaching).

Multiple factors can contribute to changes in the Medicare margin, including changes in the efficiency of providers, changes in coding that may change case-mix adjustment, and other changes in the product (e.g., reduced lengths of stay at inpatient hospitals). Knowing whether these factors have contributed to margin changes may inform decisions about whether and how much to change payments.

In sectors where the data are available, the Commission makes a judgment when assessing the adequacy of payments relative to costs. No single standard governs this relationship for all sectors, and margins are only one indicator for determining payment adequacy. Moreover, although payments can be known with some accuracy, there may be no "true" value for reported costs, which reflect accounting choices made by providers (such as allocations of costs to different services) and the relation of service volume to capacity in a given year. Further, even if costs are accurately reported, as a prudent payer, Medicare may choose not to recognize some of these costs or may exert financial pressure on providers to encourage them to reduce their costs.

Appropriateness of current costs

Our assessment of the relationship between Medicare's payments and providers' costs is complicated by differences in providers' efficiency, responses to changes in payment systems, product changes, and cost-reporting accuracy. Measuring the appropriateness of costs is particularly difficult in new payment systems because changes in response to the incentives in the new system are to be expected. For example, the number and types of visits in a home health episode changed significantly after the home health PPS was introduced, although the payments were based on the older, higher level of use and costs. In other systems, coding may change. As an example, the hospital inpatient PPS introduced a patient classification system in 2008 to improve payment accuracy. However, thus far it has resulted in higher payments because provider coding became more detailed, making patient complexity appear higher—although the underlying patient complexity was largely unchanged. Any kind of rapid change in policy, technology, or product can make it difficult to measure costs per unit.

To assess whether reported costs reflect the costs of efficient providers, we examine recent trends in the average cost per unit, variation in standardized costs and cost growth, and evidence of change in the product. One issue Medicare faces is the extent to which private payers exert pressure on providers to constrain costs. If private payers do not exert pressure, providers' costs will increase and, all other things being equal, margins on Medicare patients will decrease. Providers who are under pressure to constrain costs generally have managed to slow their growth in costs more than those who face less pressure (Berenson et al. 2010, Gaskin and Hadley 1997, Medicare Payment Advisory Commission 2005, Robinson 2011). Some have suggested that, in the hospital sector, costs are largely outside the control of hospitals and that hospitals shift costs onto private insurers to offset Medicare losses. This belief assumes that costs are immutable and not influenced by whether the hospital is under financial pressure. We find that costs do vary in response to financial pressure and that low margins on Medicare patients can result from a high cost structure that has developed in reaction to high private-payer rates. In other words, when providers receive high payment rates from insurers, they face no particular need to keep their costs low, and so all other things being equal, their Medicare margins are low because their costs are high. Lack of pressure is more common in markets where a few providers dominate and have negotiating leverage over

payers. In some sectors, Medicare itself could exert greater pressure on providers to reduce costs.

Variation in cost growth among a sector's providers can give us insight into the range of performance that facilities can achieve. For example, if some providers in a given sector have more rapid growth in cost than others, we might question whether those increases are appropriate.

Changes in product can significantly affect unit costs. Returning to the example of home health services, one would expect that substantial reductions in the number of visits per home health episode would reduce costs per episode. If costs per episode instead increased while the number of visits decreased, one would question the appropriateness of the cost growth.

In summary, Medicare payment policy should not be designed simply to accommodate whatever level of cost growth a sector demonstrates. Cost growth can oscillate from year to year depending on factors such as economic conditions and relative market power. Payment policy should accommodate cost growth only after taking into account a broad set of payment adequacy indicators, including the current level of Medicare payments.

What cost changes are expected in 2015?

The second part of the Commission's approach to developing payment update recommendations is to consider anticipated cost changes in the next payment year. This step incorporates not only the uncertainties discussed earlier concerning what cost growth is appropriate but also the uncertainty of any projection into the future. For each sector, we review evidence about the factors that are expected to affect providers' costs. One factor is the change in input prices, as measured by the applicable CMS price index. For facility providers, we start with the forecasted increase in an industry-specific index of national input prices, called a "market basket index." For physician services, we start with a CMS-derived weighted average of price changes for inputs used to provide physician services. Forecasts of these indexes approximate how much providers' costs would change in the coming year if the quality and mix of inputs they use to furnish care remained constant—that is, if there were no change in efficiency. Other factors may include the trend in actual cost growth, which could be used to inform

our estimate if it differs significantly from the projected market basket.

How should Medicare payments change in 2015?

The Commission's judgments about payment adequacy and expected cost changes result in an update recommendation for each payment system. An update is the amount (usually expressed as a percentage change) by which the base payment for all providers in a payment system is changed relative to the prior year. In considering updates, the Commission makes its recommendations this year relative to the 2014 base payment as defined in Medicare's authorizing statute—Title XVIII of the Social Security Act. The Commission's recommendations may call for an increase, a decrease, or no change from the 2014 base payment. For example, if the statutory base payment for a sector were \$100 in 2014, an update recommendation of 1 percent for a sector means that we are recommending that the base payment in 2015 for that sector should be 1 percent greater, or \$101. If the current sequester (which reduces the amount providers receive from Medicare by 2 percent) remains in effect in 2015 and makes payments in that sector different from our recommended \$101 base payment rate in 2015, that policy would not be consistent with our recommendation.

To be clear, the Commission opposes the sequester as applied to Medicare because it reduces payments across all sectors by 2 percent without regard to payment adequacy. By law, we are required to recommend payment changes to the Congress each year, and we do so by analyzing the circumstances of each sector. In our thinking, it is not reasonable to treat sectors in the same way if their beneficiaries' access to care, the quality of care, and aggregate Medicare margins differ. The Commission's approach is to evaluate the adequacy of Medicare's payments for each FFS sector, an assessment that includes both the level and distribution of payments. If in the course of this work the Commission finds savings that can be obtained without harming beneficiary access to and quality of care, the Commission will bring those options to the attention of the Congress. We will also continue to make our update recommendations year by year so we can give the Congress the best advice we can, taking into account the most current information available on payment adequacy. Our recommendations are referenced to the base rate in

statute, so they are unambiguous and are meant to stand regardless of any reductions required by the sequester.

It is inappropriate to interpret the Commission's position as recommending that 2 percentage points be added to the Commission's update recommendations to "reverse" the sequester. In fact, because of compounding, doing so would increase program spending much more quickly than overriding the sequester. The sequester in current law decreases payments to providers by 2 percent; it does not change the statutory base payment and it does not compound from year to year as do changes in base payments. In addition, beneficiary cost sharing does not decrease under the sequester; it is computed from the statutory base payment. Increasing base payments would increase beneficiary cost sharing; overriding the sequester would not. The Commission's 2014 margin projections do not include decreases in Medicare payments in 2014 resulting from the sequester because of congressional deliberations signaling a desire to find alternatives to the sequester at the time the Commission made its analytical assessment of payment adequacy. Projected margins would generally be slightly less than 2 percentage points lower than we project if those decreases were included, as we note in each of the payment adequacy chapters.

When our recommendations differ from current law, as they often do, the Congress and the Secretary of Health and Human Services would have to take action and change law or regulation to put them into effect. Each year, we look at all available indicators of payment adequacy and reevaluate prior year assumptions using the most recent data available. The Commission does not start with any presumption that an update is needed or that any increase in costs should be automatically offset by a payment update. Instead, an update (which may be positive, zero, or negative) is warranted only if it is supported by the empirical data, in the judgment of the Commission. The Commission generally takes a year-by-year approach in its deliberations so that the most recent empirical data can be evaluated.

In conjunction with the update recommendations, we may also make recommendations to improve payment accuracy that may affect the distribution of payments among providers. These distributional changes are sometimes, but not always, budget neutral. Our recommendation to shift payment weights from therapy to medically complex SNF cases is one example of a distributional change that will affect providers differentially based on their patients' characteristics.

The Commission, as it makes its update recommendations, may in some cases take payment differentials across sectors into consideration and make sure the relative update recommendations for the sectors do not exacerbate existing incentives to choose the sector based on payment considerations. The difficulty of harmonizing payments across sectors to remove inappropriate incentives illustrates one weakness of FFS payments specific to each provider type, as well as the importance of moving beyond FFS to more global and patient-centric payment systems. As we continue to move Medicare payment systems toward those approaches, we will also continue to look for opportunities to rationalize payments for specific services across sectors to approximate paying the costs of the most efficient sector and lessen financial incentives to prefer one sector over another.

Paying the same for the same service across settings

A beneficiary can sometimes receive a similar service in different settings. Depending on which setting the beneficiary chooses, Medicare and the beneficiary pay different amounts. For example, upon leaving the hospital, patients with joint replacements requiring physical therapy might be discharged with home health care or outpatient therapy or be discharged to a SNF or IRF, and Medicare payments (and beneficiary cost sharing) can differ widely as a result. (See Chapter 7 on the challenges of aligning payments in post-acute care.)

A core principle guiding the Commission is that Medicare should pay the same amount for the same service, even when it is provided in different settings. Putting this principle into practice requires that the definition of services in the settings and the characteristics of the patients be sufficiently similar. Where these conditions are not met, offsetting adjustments would have to be made to ensure comparability. Because Medicare's payment systems were developed independently and have had different update trajectories, payments for similar services can vary widely. Such differences create opportunities for Medicare and beneficiary savings if payment is set at the level applicable to the lowest priced setting where the service can be safely performed. For example, under the current payment systems, a beneficiary can receive the same physician visit service in a hospital outpatient clinic or in a physician's office. In fact, the same physician could see the same patient and provide the same service, but depending on whether the service is provided in an outpatient clinic or in a physician's office, Medicare's

payment and the beneficiary's coinsurance can differ by 80 percent or more. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to find services in different settings that are defined sufficiently similarly and to determine whether patients have the same characteristics.

In 2012, the Commission recommended that payments for E&M office visits in the outpatient and physician office sectors be made equal. This service is comparable across the two settings. Our recommendation sets payment rates for E&M office visits in both the outpatient department and physician office sectors equal to those in the physician fee schedule, lowering both program spending and beneficiary liability (Medicare Payment Advisory Commission 2012). In this report, we extend that principle to additional services for which payment rates in the outpatient PPS should be lowered to better match payment rates in the physician office setting. We also recommend consistent payment between acute care hospitals and long-term care hospitals for certain classes of patients (see Chapter 3). The Commission will continue to study other services that are provided in multiple sites of care to find additional services for which the principle of the same payment for the same service can be applied.

Budgetary consequences

The Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act of 2003 requires the Commission to consider the budgetary consequences of our recommendations. Therefore, this report documents how spending for each recommendation would compare with expected spending under current law. We also assess the effects of our recommendations on beneficiaries and providers. Although we recognize budgetary consequences, our recommendations are not driven by a budget target but instead reflect our assessment of the level of payment needed to provide adequate access to appropriate care.

Payment adequacy in context

As discussed in Chapter 1, it is essential to look at payment adequacy not only within the context of individual payment systems but also in terms of Medicare as a whole. The Commission is concerned by any increase in Medicare spending per beneficiary without a commensurate increase in value such as higher quality of care or improved health status. Growth in spending

per beneficiary, combined with the baby boomers' aging, will result in the Medicare program absorbing increasing shares of the gross domestic product and federal spending. Medicare's rising costs are projected to exhaust the Hospital Insurance Trust Fund and significantly burden taxpayers. Ensuring that the recent moderate growth trends in Medicare spending per beneficiary continue will require vigilance. The financial future of Medicare prompts us to look at payment policy and ask what can be done to develop, implement, and refine payment systems to reward quality and efficient use of resources while improving payment equity.

In many past reports, the Commission has stated that Medicare should institute policies that improve the program's value to beneficiaries and taxpayers. CMS is beginning to take such steps, and we discuss them in the sector-specific chapters that follow. Ultimately, increasing Medicare's value to beneficiaries and taxpayers requires knowledge about the costs and health outcomes of services. Until more information about the comparative effectiveness of new and existing health care treatments and technologies is available, patients, providers, and the program will have difficulty determining what constitutes high-quality care and effective use of resources.

As we examine each of the payment systems, we also look for opportunities to develop policies that create incentives for providing high-quality care efficiently across providers and over time. Some of the current payment systems create strong incentives for increasing volume, and very few of these systems encourage providers to work together toward common goals. New programs such as accountable care organizations may start to address these issues, and we are tracking their progress. In the near term, the Commission must continue to closely examine a broad set of indicators, make sure there is consistent pressure on providers to control their costs, and set a demanding standard for determining which sectors qualify for a payment update each year. ■

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